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Five Previously Unpublished Poems by Sherard Vines

William SNELL

During the thirties Sherard wrote a series of poems to me which he always thought were the best he had written. No one has ever seen them but now he is gone and my life is nearly at its end, I thought you may like to read them. He did not change.¹

Walter Sherard Vines (1890-1974) was a British author, poet and critic, and a visiting professor at Keio University from 1923 to 1928. He later became the first G. F. Grant Professor of English at University College, Hull.² Elder son of the renowned Oxford botanist Sydney Howard Vines (1850-1934),³ he was a recognized poet even before coming to Japan at the invitation of Junsaburo Nishiwaki (1894-1982), professor of English at Keio from 1925 onwards, and himself a well-known modernist poet. Vines was educated at Magdalen College School and New College, Oxford. He became editor of *Oxford Poetry* from 1910 to 1914, when he joined the army at the outbreak of war. Like his friend Edmund Blunden,⁴ who also arrived in Japan around the same time, he saw action in the trenches, as a captain in the Highland Light Infantry, before being wounded and subsequently invalided out of the service in 1917.⁵ By this time Vines was already a peripheral member of the Bloomsbury set, having been published in Edith Sitwell's *Wheels*

anthologies between 1917 and 1921 along with the likes of Aldous Huxley and Wilfred Owen. It has been recorded that T. S. Eliot first became acquainted with the Sitwells through a poetry reading chaired by Sir Edmund Gosse ‘then England’s arbiter of literary taste’:

. . . a dinner party was held for the chairman . . . and the ‘performing poets’ — among them Robert Graves, Robert Nichols, Irene Rutherford McLeod, Sherard Vines, Aldous Huxley, Edith Sitwell, Sacheverell Sitwell, Osbert Sitwell, Viola Tree, Siegfried Sassoon (who, however, did not turn up), and Eliot.⁶

Vine’s first collection of poems, *The Kaleidoscope*, was published in 1920. He was also the author of two prose volumes about Japan, *Humours Unreconciled: A Tale of Modern Japan* (1928) and *Yofuku, or Japan in Trousers* (1931) a travel book, as well as two other volumes of poetry written in but otherwise unrelated to the country, *The Pyramid* (1926) and *Triforum* (1928). It appears that Blunden was instrumental in getting *The Pyramid* into print: he suggested to his friend Richard Cobden-Sanderson, who set up as a publisher in Thavies Inn, London, that he consider the work by ‘a lively young poet of the Sitwellian tint’ whose poems he considered as ‘modern & . . . masterfully, full of novel poetic motives and splendid imaginations.’⁷ Son of the printer Thomas Cobden-Sanderson, who had known William Morris and Burne-Jones, Cobden-Sanderson was Blunden’s main publisher from 1920 and during the latter’s period in Japan, 1924-1927, issued all eighteen of Blunden’s books.⁸ *The Pyramid* contains prefatory verses by Edmund Blunden and Yone Noguchi (1875-1947), another friend and poet who taught at Keio. Professor of English Literature at Keio from 1905, Noguchi was instrumental in bringing visiting scholars from abroad together in

Japan; he also became the subject of a biography which Vines wrote and which was anonymously translated into Japanese: *Yone Noguchi: A Critical Study* (Tokyo: Daiichi Shoubou, 1925).

Also while employed at Keio, Vines wrote and published *Movements in Modern English Poetry and Prose* (Oxford University Press; Ohkayama Publishing Co.: Tokyo, 1927), a book specifically written with Japanese students in mind, the greater part of which was mainly compiled from 'lectures given at Keio University and elsewhere' which were 'recast and expanded by means of extracts from articles written some time ago for the Tokyo Nichi Nichi, Osaka Mainichi, and Mita Bungaku...'. Vines' tutor at Oxford had been George Stuart Gordon (1881-1942), Fellow of Magdalen College from 1907 to 1915. He was Professor of English Literature at Leeds University, going on to become Merton Professor of English Literature at Oxford, 1922-1928, President of Magdalen College, Professor of Poetry there, and later Vice-Chancellor (1938-1941). He was one of J. R. R. Tolkien's group of readers of Icelandic sagas, known as the Kolbitars.⁹ Gordon records, in his introduction to *Movements*. . . , that Vines was 'my pupil at Oxford' where he 'read essays to me under the Magdalen elms.'

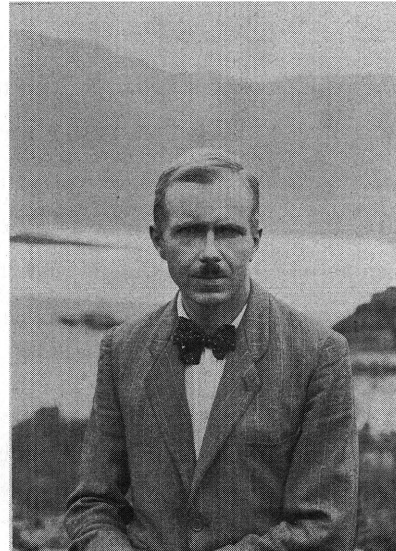
He was then as now, a poet, and a critic of refreshing frankness and irreverence, not easily awed by the ritual coteries or the mumbo-jumbo of established reputation. Much has happened since then, to shake the tree of good and evil: for both of us four years of soldiering, and marks, moreover, to remind us of it. Yet still, in this amazing post-war world, we continue the old exploring game of literature. I have the temerity to 'profess' it in England, and he, with more justice, 'professes' (and produces) it in

Japan.¹⁰

Gordon's introduction, however, is tempered by the following comment:

That his book is contentious, and his judgments disputable, Mr. Vines must be well aware. He speaks his mind in many questions which no living person can decide. I find myself sometimes dissenting from him; which is all as it should be, and only shows that he is alive [all too human?]. I think him consistently too hard on the men, now middle aged, whose stride was broken by the war. I value some of them very differently.¹¹

Gordon was seemingly disapproving of Vines' support for new movements in writing: 'I am startled by the gravity with which the works of young men is analyzed into periods: "Richard Aldington in his later style",' but adds that 'Seniority gives no advantage in such matters, and when I differ from Mr. Vines I never forget that he has the younger pulse.' It was a post-war movement which Vines was very much in sympathy with and one which was, as he wrote in *100 Years of Eng-*



The Author
(From a recent Photograph)

'The Author [From a recent Photograph]'.
Frontispiece to *Movements in Modern English Poetry and Prose* (1927)

lish Literature, 'almost synchronized with a revival of interest in metaphysical poetry, whether Dante or Donne.'¹²

In 1928 Vines left Keio and Japan to take up a tenured position as Professor of English at the University College of Hull (later to become the University of Hull) which was at that time an adjunct of the University of London; he remained there until his retirement in 1952. In 1930 he married his second wife, Agnes Rennie Cumming, and they had a daughter named Rennie J. Vines (b. 1933). On his return to Britain Vines published a further and final volume of poetry, *Triforium* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1928) including verses which appeared in Keio's *Mita Bungaku* and *The Decachord*, a magazine that ran from 1924 to 1931. Vines does not appear to have published much if any poetry after 1930, when his major critical work *The Course of English Classicism from the Tudor to Victorian Age* appeared. This was followed in 1934 by *Georgian Satirists*. It would seem that since recognition as a poet eluded him, eclipsed as he was by his contemporaries, he gave up interest in pursuing this creative interest. Indeed, the poems printed here for the first time may have been some of the last Vines wrote. It can only be surmised that he came to realize that poets sometimes make better teachers than teachers do poets.

The economist Eric Roll (Lord Roll of Ipsden: 1907-2005)¹³ joined the faculty at the University College of Hull as an assistant lecturer in the spring of 1931, appointed with the backing of John Maynard Keynes, later becoming professor of economics and commerce there from 1935 to 1946. He later met his future wife, Freda Taylor (1909-1998), then a student in the English department (and more than likely a student of Vines) and they were married in September 1934. In his 1985 memoirs Roll writes:

. . . the smallness of the college presented exceptional opportunities for keeping in touch with members of other departments and for making friends. Among these were such stimulating colleagues as Sherard Vines, poet, novelist and former tutor to Prince Chichibu of Japan¹⁴

As he relates, it was through Vines that he met the poet T. S. Eliot, then a director of the publisher Faber and Faber:

I had met Eliot a number of times at the Russell Square offices of Fabers', but an opportunity for a more extended talk came when he gave a lecture in Hull at the invitation of Sherard Vines who had known him well in the twenties. (The theme, as I recall was much the same as his *After Strange Gods*.) My wife and I lived opposite the Vineses in Cottingham [East Yorkshire] and were asked to dine with Eliot. The conversation was not confined to literature, poetry or politics: indeed the greater part was devoted to the merits of different cheeses of which both Vines and Eliot were connoisseurs and we at least amateurs.¹⁵

One of Vines' students at Hull was Harold Andrew Mason (1911-93); from 1949 Assistant Director of Studies in English, at Downing College, Cambridge and editor of the literature periodical *Scrutiny* as well as founder-editor of *The Cambridge Quarterly* (1966).¹⁶ Writing about his review of William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* which appeared in 1930, he stated that it was

. . . I fear . . . what would now be called a 'rave'. It recorded the

fact that Empson was saying the very things I wanted to hear. For at that time I was the product of a circle brought into existence by Professor Sherard Vines, who was a great admirer of Laura Riding and Robert Graves's *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927) and the I. A. Richards of *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924).¹⁷ (Empson had reviewed a volume of Vines' poems in *Cambridge Review*, 1928). We were taught by Professor Vines to value Donne and the Metaphysicals and all the literary fads of the day which Empson chose as the *corpora uilia* of his critical exercises.¹⁸

The above quotation is remarkable when we consider the first of the poems below, 'Love's progress', which either by coincidence or design shares the same title as John Donne's *Elegy XVIII*.

The Poems

Though [Vines'] work has now been largely forgotten, [William] Plomer thought him a poet of distinction; his writing is marked by neo-metaphysical conceits and the piling up of rec-ondite detail. It was Vines who, on his return to Europe in June 1928, carried with him the first of Plomer's Japanese writing to be published, *Paper Houses*, which Hogarth Press brought out in 1929, and which Plomer dedicated to Vines.¹⁹

The five poems published herein for the first time were found loosely inserted in a first edition copy of *A Hundred Years of English Literature* published by Duckworth in 1950, which Vines had seemingly given to the wife of Eric Roll, inscribed in blue ink at the front to Freda Roll

'with homage of the author'. The bookseller corroborated that the book was part of the collection of the late Eric Roll which was auctioned at Christies.²⁰ It contained two handwritten letters: one from Maisie Howard,²¹ 42, Fairfield Avenue Kirk Ella, Hull, dated July 20th, 1978, together with five pages of typewritten poems:

Dear Freda

I was very pleased to know that you were interested in Sherard's poems but our conversation in the library at the university was interrupted unfortunately. During the early thirties Sherard wrote a series of poems to me which he always thought were the best he had written. No one has ever seen them but now he is gone and my life is nearly at its end I thought you might like to read them. He did not change.

Please forgive the funny d of my typewriter but it has got worn out over the years.

I'm sending this letter to Albany hoping that if you are not there, it will be forwarded.

Hope you are both well. I did enjoy seeing you.

Love

Maisie Howard.

Also included was a signed letter from Sherard Vines complete with envelope addressed to Mr and Mrs Eric Roll, South Square, London, dated September 3rd, 1960, and sent from Rushbrooke, Cobh, County Cork, Ireland.²² They were purchased through Caspian Rare Books via the Internet in February of 2008, and discuss family matters, children growing up, and local issues such as the observation that 'Our seclusion

is being invaded by tiresome dockyard developments on the waterside, but the view of the harbour may still be obtained through a lattice of cranes and pile-drivers.'

The five poems included herein are 'Love's Progress': 16 lines (4 stanzas) with its image of someone being, martyr-like, consumed by flames, perhaps comparable with Donne, but without the latent eroticism of Donne's verse 'Bound Prentice': 34 lines (5 stanzas); 'Immanence': 28 lines (5 stanzas) in which the theme of fire is returned to; 'Past Regrets and Present Speculations': 10 lines; and the final poem is 'Questions and Answers': 7 lines (2 stanzas), which is perhaps the best of the poems.

Some doubt will always remain as to the reliability of Maisie's transcribing verses which were most probably handwritten in their original, especially with regard to capitalization and punctuation. Here I have retained the capitalization she employed throughout.

1. Love's progress

I would not unlive one action of this pyre
not but for slower repetition
and finer knowledge of each turn,
slower and brighter in procession.

This element, mother of elements
Terribly consumes and creates
At speed at first unbearable
To shrinking but desirous mind.

It passes as the knower half waking
From his first trance at the first onslaught
not fully apprehends
The profound import of hastening smoke.

He is abandoned, troubled
His sight darkened; he regrets his littleness
before these gulfs of immense shining,
His levities, his futilities.

2. Bound prentice*

To rank among those tied to you, were
Above what may be sought, imagined.
Yet, now, have I no proof? If proof, may the binding
made stronger than ironic years, hold
durable, severer than circumstance
With sour looks, and traitor's mode.

Since there's on trust to place in
Our world's separative habit,
Inward to you I turn, and pray
'Hold to me strongly, flesh and spirit ardent
in endeavour, in seizing all or mine
that can yield — from me the virtue, to you the solace.'

Long to remain prisoner in your light,
To be saved from formless emptiness,

Dark winter wastes of drifting
ranged all about where our are not seen,
To be received, held dear — could I,
Brazen enough, solicit these high terms?

Rather, leave and ampler times of nearness,
To squander hours, thought, self on what
may grant you fierier life, broader
delights; to think your thought, become your self
win understanding of your veiled looks, your
graced silences.

Dear subject of my enterprise, mistress of
these affective tides dragged you-ward,
Hold me to wide studious years, the
leisure to know, long-gained skill
at assay of and piercing through your good,
loveliest things set deepest;
I am not for a night, a year.
Lover's scholarship is not so
brought to fruition, but keeps
a distant end.

*One who is bound by indentures or by legal agreement to serving someone for a certain time, with a view to learning an art, or trade, in which his master —or in this case 'mistress' —is bound to instruct him.

3. Immanence*

In all my wakings and sleep, in
work and grief, lightness and quiet
You rest closer than fire to faggot,
Sun to his summer, heart upon heart
When lovers hold and desperately
kiss against time's lapsing strain.

In my scented mornings you; in noon's
whiter blast you whitest lead
my storm of thought home to the
dumb bedside hour.
I breathe, eat, drink, the you that is
sole sacrament and strong queller of all deaths.

The you of dawn, of reflection,
True presence, monstrance**of my creed.
The quickening you, the glad season,
The laughter and the return,
Snow-gates broken, green youngness libertine
From old wounds of forgotten wars.

You, only history of my times,
only spirit brooding on my seas
patterning their vague swell
with form, direction,
blowing sharp the colour, keen the sweet anger.

But yet, dear pain, more intimately
set, more secret, here you track
my way through nerve and artery: nothing
In theses caves
lies nearer.

*Immanence, derived from the Latin *in manere* 'to remain within', refers to philosophical and metaphysical theories of the divine as existing and acting within the mind or the world. This concept generally contrasts or coexists with the idea of transcendence.

**Monstrance: an open or transparent receptacle in which (in the Catholic Church) the consecrated Host is exposed for veneration.

4. Past regrets and present speculations

Lately, walking in fields, alone, far from you,
Where the grass rankly towered by t[h]e rank hedgeside,
I saw it bruised and crushed down to a nesting-lair
By recent lovers in their twilight embracing.
'Ah, happy form, not mine' I mused, unhoping
That time to suppliant hands would entrust, if grudgingly,
The white host, incarnate and too precious
for my vain care.
Frail will consumes in the heats, love's rout scampers
Questioning, filling with plangent noise all spaces of repose.

5. Questions and Answers

When for a little the shock and glory of you recedes
So that my dazzled sense may again frame thoughts, words,
I ask myself if the pang of it is deep in you, as in me:
And why you have come into me with revolution and surprise
And how a rareness as perfect as yours could be designed
In this common-moulded country: and why and how far mine?
And when or whether, the sweet past, the dull foul end will
Creep frostily to make all fast in worse than death

Quiet, quiet, stupid brain querying, love drunken loose one:
I have, remember, no claim on tomorrow or today.
Poachers in this are outlaws and must risk,
Accept sweet and sour as falls, unquestioning.
Meditate rather today's beauty in her glance and motion;
That her eyes warm for, welcome your appeal, your entering.
Her breast answering in yours the silence when loves words fail:
Her flashing fleet loveliness given you unquestioningly.
Only a fool would dream of more or a knave whine for it.

NOTES

- 1 Extract from letter dated July 20th, 1978, from Maisie Howard to Freda Roll; see page 94 above.
- 2 For a detailed account of Vines' period at Keio see William Snell, 'James Cousins and Sherard Vines at Keio University: 1919-20; 1923-28 Part Two', *The Hiyoshi Review of English Studies*, 50 (2007), 43-68. This paper also includes a list of Vines' known published writings.
- 3 He had a sister, Margaret Beaufort Vines, and a younger brother Howard William Copland Vines, who became Professor of Pathology at London Uni-

versity.

- 4 Blunden had been invited to teach at the Imperial University of Tokyo.
- 5 See Margaret Espinasse, 'Obituary: Emeritus Professor W. S. Vines', *Gazette*, University of Hull, Autumn (1974), 44-45.
- 6 Russell Kirk, *Eliot and His Age: T. S. Eliot's Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Random House, 1971), pp. 14-15; emphasis mine. See also Snell, p. 47.
- 7 Miriam J. Benkovitz, 'Edmund Blunden and the Incitements of Japan', *Books at Iowa*, 32 (April 1980) <<http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/spec-coll/bai/blunden.html>> [accessed 8th March 2006]
- 8 Barry Webb, *Edmund Blunden: A Biography* (Yale University Press, 1990), p. 235. See Snell, p. 48.
- 9 See M. C. G., *The Life of George S. Gordon: 1881-1942* (Oxford, 1945).
- 10 Introduction to *Movements in Modern English Poetry and Prose; with an introductory note by G. S. Gordon* (Humphrey Milford: Oxford University Press; Tokyo: Ohkayama Publishing Co., 1927; repr. Folcroft Library Editions, 1970), p. i.
- 11 Introduction to *Movements*, pp. ii, iii.
- 12 Sherard Vines, *100 Years of English Literature* (Duckworth, 1950; Duckworth's 100 years series); reissued as *A Hundred Years of English Literature, 1840-1940* (Collier Books, 1962), p. 182.
- 13 The son of a banker, Mathias Roll, he had come to England at the age of seventeen to study at Birmingham University. Roll became a lecturer at the new University College at Hull, where he was soon promoted to Professor of Economics and Commerce. Another colleague was the mathematician and biologist Jacob Bronowski (1908-74), who was also a poet and taught at Hull from 1934 to 1942. See Eric Roll, *Crowded Hours: an autobiography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 31.
- 14 Eric Roll, *Crowded Hours*, pp. 29-30. Vines also became a tutor to Prince Chichibu, brother of the Showa Emperor, who was at Magdalen College, Oxford, for two years from 1925.
- 15 Eric Roll, *Crowded Hours*, pp. 31-32.
- 16 See *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 24.1(1995) dedicated to him.
- 17 The literary critic and rhetorician I. A. Richards, along with Blunden and Nishiwaki, 'supplied me with indispensable material', according to Vines' *Prefatory Note to Movements*. Richards visited Japan along with his wife in 1927 (see John Constable, ed., *Selected Letters of I. A. Richards*, CH (Oxford,

- 1990)).
- 18 H. A. Mason, 'The Last Straw', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 14 (1985), 123-44; 133-34.
 - 19 Peter F. Alexander, *William Plomer: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.143.
 - 20 E-mail message from the bookseller dated Wed, 6 Feb 2008.
 - 21 Local records reveal only that one Maisie Alice Howard died North Yorkshire, July 2002. Given the lack of evidence other than the poems, I have not attempted conjecture as to her relationship with Vines.
 - 22 Vines retired to Ireland after leaving Hull; Cobh was, according to Blunden, his wife's hometown. See Snell, p. 47.